

Bridgeport Cultural Arts Center Project

Interviewers: Yohuru Williams

Interviewee: Richard Stamats

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Stamats: Richard Stamats.

Q: Okay and Rich, I'm talking to you again from where?

Stamats: You're in Fairfield (Fairfield University), I assume.

Q: Uh-huh. I am. And you are?

Stamats: And I'm in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

Q: Okay. I just want to check this to make sure we're getting good recording. I want to thank you again for talking to Michelle and I about your time at the Cultural Arts Center and I just want to make sure that we have permission to cite this interview as part of that project.

Stamats: Permission is granted, no problem.

Q: We'll also send you a full copy of the interview and transcript so you'll have an opportunity before anything's done with it to make any corrections or review what you shared with me today.

Stamats: Okay.

Q: Great. So, Rich, I just want to start --I sent you a couple of articles I thought you might find interesting that mentioned you from *The Bridgeport Post*. But I just want to start by asking you about where you grew up. It's an open-ended question, but could you tell me a little bit about where you grew up, how you came to be employed by the Cultural Arts Center.

Stamats: Okay. I grew up in Fort Wayne, Indiana. Left there--my father died when I was sixteen--and I had been going to a private military high school, so my last year of school I went to Montgomery Blair High School in Silver Spring, Maryland. From there I moved to Florida and from Florida--I was there less than a year, and came up to attend college in the D.C. area. And from college--I was there about a year, I left college, went back to Florida and then I moved directly to Buenos Aires, Argentina. And I was there for less than a year and I came back to Florida and had a boat yard and I worked for UPI (United Press International) covering South Florida as a photographer/journalist and also at that time was building a sailboat, a 39-foot sailboat, in Florida.

I worked with the judges in Fort Lauderdale as a pre-trial investigation working with youth that had got into trouble and worked with a drug rehab place to help kids and used my business as a place where I could work and I could be with them and see where things were. And then I would report these things to--pre-sentencing, actually, is what I did--and then I would turn these over to the judge, my estimation of how this young person was and how they were doing and so forth.

Q: This was in Florida?

Stamats: Yeah, that was in Florida.

Q: About what year was that, Rich, that you were involved in that program?

Stamats: 1970. 1970.

Q: And just so we're clear--you went to college in the D.C. area--what school did you attend?

Stamats: Oh, I went to Rockville Junior College.

Q: Junior college. Okay. Great. And your major at that time?

Stamats: Art Education and Art.

Q: So, when you were in Buenos Aires just want to make sure that I'm following the line here--you were always working as a photographer or were you--could you just tell me a little bit about what you were doing in those places before you became involved in that program in D.C.?

Stamats: I met a lady on the beach, on Pompano Beach, Florida, who was Argentine and when I moved up to Maryland we became engaged. She--her father was working at the--he was in the military of Argentina and he was working with the consulate and the OAS--the Organization of American States. He was attached to that. When they left I think in January of 1968, in February I followed and went down there.

Q: And you were there approximately--

Stamats: When I-- this is hard to remember all of this. Down there--I attended a college down there. Audited a class at a place called Escuela de Bellas Artes. And I sought employment--I never succeeded--one of the reasons I returned to the States. My visa ran out.

I stayed engaged to this young lady, came back here and I determined that I was going to build a sailboat so that I could go down there and have a place to live and work as a photographer or journalist or whatever to cover some of the stories and practice art. So, that all took place and I got a "Dear John" letter, so I sold my boat, I sold my boat and everything else, and decided I needed to move north. I didn't like having one season all year round so I missed living up north so I moved up to Connecticut because I had an aunt who lived up there. And when I got up there I worked for a boat yard because that's kind of what I was knowing and needed to learn what the area was like. And then I--where did I go? Then I was hired by a corporation to be the captain on a boat that went up and down Long Island Sound and I would take their guests wherever they wanted to go, usually up to Mystic, and treat them nice and then take them back and so on and so forth.

During that period of time that I was working as a captain, my next door neighbor to my aunt's home where I was staying had heard of the Cultural Arts Center up in Bridgeport and she knew of my desire to work with kids and youth and that I liked working with that and I was, you know, practicing art and doing a number of pieces and stuff, and she said, "You might want to go up and apply."

At that time, the Arts Center was still located downtown in an office building. And I walked in there and told them who I was. I talked to Ben Johnson--Bill Collins was there--we chatted for an hour or two and he said that one of the people that had been working there was going to be taking off for summer and they had classes and summer camp programs that they wanted to be involved with, and they were looking for somebody that had different kinds of skills and I certainly did--photography and so on that neither one of those two had. I had about the same amount of training in art that they had. And it seemed like a good fit. So they took me on--it was a part-time thing. I was still captain on this boat. And usually it was only done on weekends and I thought this would be, you know, some way I could get my foot in the door in working with this Arts Center.

Q: And that was what year?

Stamats: Hmm--1971.

Q: 1971--because they were still downtown. That's perfect.

Stamats: 1970.

Q: 1970.

Stamats: Yeah.

Q: So you're still captaining the boat and you were working at the Arts Center. When did your employment there become full time?

Stamats: Wait a second, let me think about the years, I'm going to give it to you accurately. I think it was '72.

Q: '72?

Stamats: '72. That's right.

Q: Okay. I'll be able to follow it in the newspapers and through other sources, so I'll get back to you and let you know for sure but if you think it's '72--that's great. I'll be able to document it--don't need to worry so much about the years--

Stamats: Okay.

Q: We'll be able to follow the years. So you're there, you're still captaining the boat. When did your employment become full-time?

Stamats: Well, when the season ended for the boat, I just talked to them and I said, "I'd like to continue on and work full-time at the Center"--because I was really enjoying it, the little bit of time that I was--so they said, "Yeah. Good. You'll be a natural fit." We all respected one another and it felt like it was kind of an exciting thing that we were doing.

Q: Let's talk a little bit about the classes that you taught. And you said that, of course, Ben Johnson was there and Bill Collins was there, but you brought a different skill set: of course the art and the painting but also photography. Can you talk about what classes you taught and how you--you know, what your basic responsibilities were at the Arts Center at that point?

Stamats: I was just--just one of the teachers and Wendy (Bridgeforth) and Patty (Melvin) were the other teachers there at that initial period of time. And they were--I mean, we did all sorts of things--the skills weren't so well-assigned--we didn't have a dark room downtown so we really didn't do much photography. We shot the pictures and so on but we had them processed outside of the Center in those days.

They were getting close to moving to the Gary Crooks Center. They were still doing some planning on how it should be laid out. They asked for my advice about the dark room and stuff. And they had intended to make it all painted black on the inside and, you know, I recommended that they not do that, that they make it, you know, bright white, as white as they could and just

make sure that we had really excellent seals on the door regardless. I said it would be much easier to clean and so on if we could kind of use that kind of appearance. So we changed that from what their intent was and offered a couple of other ideas--I don't recall specifically--but just generally in conversations we kind of planned out how we wanted the Gary Crooks Center.

I think that I--I remember when we moved into the Arts Center. It wasn't too long--we had--I was teaching one class. There was a furniture store down on the ground level, and I was teaching them some things about polyester resins and paintings and pouring and coloring, how we could do that, and I was doing that with our class being there but with Ben and Bill because they were curious to learn another media. And 'lo and behold not knowing that our air handler for our Arts Center directly followed all of the air down into the furniture store.

Q: (LAUGHTER) So what happened with that?

Stamats: So they became overwhelmed with all these resin smells coming down there and the Fire Department came out and discovered that we were the ones responsible for it. We apologized for it, you know, and we certainly didn't do it again.

Q: So--and this is interesting--so you did have an opportunity to help them plan that move to the Gary Crooks Center. Can you just talk a little bit about that--to your knowledge, what motivated the move, of how they determined that site, and, you know, I know you talked about the dark room in particular--what other things you and the rest of the staff were excited about, at least in terms of being in that space over the downtown location.

Stamats: Well, you know, at first they didn't--I was just part-time there and they didn't discuss anything about it to me. It was only when they let me in that they started expressing that this had developed, and they had been working on it for three or four months, and they had been putting in their input as to what they would like and how they designed it and it and so on. And it was getting down to --probably to the last month or so before contractors were going to do some of the finishing touches that they asked me what I thought about some of the things they knew that I had experience with. And I didn't know where the Center was; I hadn't visited it--and, you know, I just sort of went by--and I asked them when they were going to start and they said they didn't know, there had been a couple of delays so they didn't know themselves but be ready to move. I don't remember that part of it very well anymore.

Q: Now, can you talk a little bit about the type of students who attended the Arts Center and just your experiences, your day-to-day experiences, in working with youth there. Just give--

Stamats: It was the same populations that we served over at the Gary Crooks Center, too. It was just kids in the--mostly fourth and fifth graders who came there. And they would come in. We

had--I think we had three different rooms but two rooms were generally used there for it. And we had some of the same tables that we'd transferred over that they would work around. And we just, you know, whatever kind of projects--Wendy was the one who had--I watched her and saw what she was doing and then I sort of replicated that plus with my own twist on things. And I just began getting the kids engaged with different projects, showing them any kind of things from--we didn't have a kiln or anything so we didn't do clay or things--so everything was always pretty much two-dimensional as far as what we assembled and stuff we painted or drew. And there was quite a bit to cover just with that. And the kids seemed to be always very excited when they came. It was a little strange to have them in an office building but we made it work.

Q: And by the time you moved to the Gary Crooks Center, how did that experience change?

Stamats: Well, we were just excited with the space. It was such a huge open area and we had so many more opportunities--we had a kiln and ceramics and I was very familiar with clay and pottery and building sculptures in clay. I'd done that here and also in Argentina--I'd worked with, you know, a brick-making company down in Argentina, so there was a lot of experience with that for me. Bill and Ben did not have--nor Wendy--did not have any experience or much experience in ceramics so that became one of the areas. And then the photography--I worked with teaching our staff how to develop and use the dark room and enlargers and stuff like that. And then they kind of would go on their own. We started having a lot more three-dimensional kinds of projects.

I kind of became the guy who would go out to the companies and who would--to scavenge--to be a scavenger for any kind of thing. I went to plastic companies and they gave us lots of scraps of Plexiglas and things like that. We'd go--I guess there were some purse-making factories in Bridgeport and they did some other things so they had a lot of scrap leather so they would give us that. So scrounging was something that I sort of picked up. Ben had been doing some scrounging with Lenny Becourt and Becourt Paints, which was a big name in oil and acrylics paints. And Lenny contributed by letting us have dented tubes of paint at no charge and that was of huge value in money and gave us a lot more opportunities to do something more professional.

Q: Now, the Center had a budget, but you talked about scrounging. All of you were pretty resourceful in kind of bringing supplies to the Center. What other ways were you--

Stamats: Well--(CROSSTALK)

Q: I'm sorry, go ahead.

Stamats: No, no, go ahead. That's okay.

Q: I was just curious: what other ways besides scrounging were you able to get monies. Did you have donations? Were you-- Did you-- I remember the first time I ever did a piece of ceramics it was with you. And I distinctly remember that experience. You were just a phenomenal teacher. Did you have formal training as a teacher or did you learn just by observing Wendy?

Stamats: I knew--I just wanted to see how she was treating kids and what sort of things she was showing them. I knew--I had always kind of been a teacher mode kid. When I was very young and then in junior high, one of the things I learned a lot was geology; I loved learning about rocks and chemistry and so on. And my science teacher at the time had me teach--I was in seventh grade at the time and he had me teach the eighth grade geology class for two weeks--helping the kids get excited about rocks. And I had a tremendous collection. I'd collected for years and stuff and so I brought those in and explained how rocks were formed. And I had always been involved with science fairs as a kid growing up. That was something that I did like doing. But I really experience as a seventh grader, I thought it was so cool to teach my classmates and the eighth grade above me and I thought, I wouldn't mind doing this for the rest of my life. So I always had a penchant for, and liked working with, young people. So that kind of just came naturally to me. I didn't know that--I didn't have any specifically formal--I mean, I'd certainly been a student for a long time and you knew what made a good teacher and you knew what didn't by that time.

Q: You also had a great deal of cultural sensitivity, and just a great awareness of the history and culture--of course the predominant population by the time you got to the Gary Crooks Center were African American and Latino students. Can you talk a little bit about that and what made you--I just remember your patience and just kind of genuine warmth that you projected in terms of working with those populations. Can you talk about that and what inspired you and motivated you in that regard?

Stamats: Okay, I went to Howe Military School in Howe, Indiana, and it was there for the first time in my life that anyone African American was in a classroom with me. But not only--well, when I first went there, I went in the middle of the year and I was put in with somebody--I don't know if I want to say this--I was put in this room of this guy who turned out to be gay. And he began to attack me--I was bigger than him and I was upset about it and this was the early sixties so this was really very weird. And I reported it because I didn't want to have my roommate--have to be worried about where I was in my room. Well, the roommate was expelled from school, and when his father found out the real reason he was expelled, he committed suicide. And that shook me quite deeply. I mean, I didn't--I felt that it was just so wrong. He wasn't a horrible kid, he was just a guy who was attracted to me, I mean, that was it in its simplest form, and I wasn't accustomed to it. So that was--that made me think about people in a different way than I'd ever thought. I was freshman age, in high school.

Then they put me in a different room. I got to select my roommate for the next time-- they changed every six weeks or two months or so. And so I got to select another person and the person I became a roommate with was African American. He was from Chicago. He came from a wealthy--his dad, his parents were--his father was an attorney in Chicago and he was pretty affluent. But the thing that I--his name is Mellon and that's how I knew he shared--he was incredibly witty and I just began to really, really like him. I mean, he would be attacked with all these racist kind of comments and he would deflect them and put them in their place in a second--in just a flash. And it was just--just the courage he had-- He wasn't tall enough to legally be R.O.T.C.--he was less than 5 foot tall so he couldn't be in that but he could tear down anybody in a moment if they presented themselves in a racist form. And I just began to admire him and look at him. And there was an occasion, which he had sliced somebody at mess hall and really tore them down, and he was relentless on this guy and this guy just felt so foolish. Well, he got his other buddies together and they gave us what they called a "blanket party" where we walked into our room and blankets were pulled over us and they beat with (INAUDIBLE) and stuff and let us go but we were sore and hurt and banged up and stuff.

And this was--I had already seen a number of things that were happening at home on the TV at home with my parents over what was happening race-wise. And I didn't know anybody black and I didn't know anything then about it, but it disturbed me. I saw the dogs attacking people and saw that and so on and it just was not something I could understand. And I equated that with my friend and it was too hard to believe that that was happening to him.

So when I went home I told my mother that I had made a new roommate and I really liked him and then I told her he was African American.

She said, "Don't let your father know."

I said, "Why?"

She said, "He just would not like it."

I said, "Oh my God!"

So I did not tell my father. And I was extremely close to my father--I just admired him enormously--he was such a great man. And he had African Americans working for him that he treated respectfully, but he had some issues there about it. I never--as I said, he died when I was sixteen, I was there in military school--so we never had a chance for me to get his take on everything but I had not seen him--I knew that he abhorred, like, the John Birch Society and the Ku Klux Klan. He would talk very negatively about them and say that these were things that

shouldn't exist in our society, and he had voted for Kennedy, so there was just this kind of thing that I didn't know how far it was or what it was. I didn't think about qualifying it or understanding it.

So all that took place and I then--you had a period of after your third year, your dinner mess, and I could go to the library. So I began studying and learning about whatever things there were about black history, the black leaders, the different things--And from there that--because I just had never heard of it--there certainly was no black history taught or anything and I just felt really, really ignorant about what was going on in the world. And felt that I was thrown in this situation for me to educate myself. And that began the impetus or that was where the seed was planted that I need to do something. And then my senior year in high school at Montgomery Blair, I became involved in civil rights marches. I would attend the things that--I got to see Dr. King speak in New York--I attended different things in Washington, D.C.

In '67 there were some riots on Georgia Avenue I went there and took some photographs of it. I talked to some people on the periphery of it, they were sort of standing there and watching. They said they thought it would be a good idea if I didn't hang around too long, that whatever I felt, it wouldn't be seen as what was in my heart as opposed to the color of my skin from the other side. I said I understood, so okay, I didn't make myself obvious--

Q: So by the time you get to Bridgeport--because I also remember kind of a distinct feature of your teaching--you would always kind of talk about a little history, a little science. You were always kind of endlessly fascinating in that way. Were you just incorporating those things that you had learned and sharing with the students that way organically or did you see that as integral to their understanding of art?

Stamats: Kind of because it's my experience--you know, at one time I was thinking of become a chemical engineer so I have some of that aptitude for how things work and I find that when people do they have a different appreciation for things that way--that you can just be too simple. I have a daughter who's now thirty years old and when she was in grade school, the kids--we'd have the parent-teacher meetings. The teachers--this is when she was in first grade, second grade, third grade--and the teachers would say--once we had conversations with them-- said, "Your child is just so, so different that they incorporate language and effort and explanations of things in a way that none of other children do. They don't understand things. And your daughter can talk about psychology, she can talk about her feelings. She can talk--" The vocabulary that she had was so much greater than what her contemporaries were-- And I said, "Well, I just kind of started talking that way from very little. And always read and always explained things in a full sense. As long as she was paying attention, I was going to talk."

Q: Let's talk a little bit about your colleagues at the Arts Center. I know you mentioned Ben

Johnson who hired you when you came in. Who else stands out in your mind? Who were the people that you worked with, and do you have any distinct memories about them?

Stamats: Ben was a guy who probably his personality was the thing that got a lot of people because he had a--I mean, a pretty powerful, good reputation in the community from his high school days and so on. And he was sort of known as a leader, so he was really a key element. And his love for art and his enthusiasm for it and--you know, in a way he could be a coach with people--and he loved music--It just seemed like there were so many things that he wanted to explore and achieve and go for. I found that was an excellent attribute for the position he was in. He had a good presence about him from that standpoint. And, you know, he was charming and that was a very effective thing for us to have. We did go on TV together. PBS I think showed up in New Haven. They wanted to do a story on the Arts Center and what we were doing. And he was very comfortable in that kind of setting. He seemed to do better sometimes under pressure than he did just on a daily kind of stuff. We didn't try to do much administrative actually--we just seemed to want to explore all different sorts of avenues with our art and with kids and things they wanted to do.

Q: And let's--anyone else stand out? You mentioned a little bit about Wendy and Bill.

Stamats: Yeah, Patty and Wendy, they were just really good and patient. Wendy would just do all this incredible prep work for the students that were coming in every day. And she would have amazing projects for them. And she was so thorough at every step that she would go through to get ready for the kids' classes and stuff. I mean, there would be some amazing things coming out of an hour, an hour-and-a-half class and they couldn't have been achieved without her going through a lot of preparatory work for it. She was very particular; she could do the kind of arts work that she does--and I have a painting in my house which she did--was very meticulous and clean and at just had a---kind of like an African American sense to it, just really good stuff. Even recently I've encouraged her that she go back and do more work on that--of her paintings--because, you know, I think that like a lot of us we get diverted from one thing and do so many other roles in our lives. But I do think that she has had a really natural gift for design, for coloring, for paintings and patterns and so on. I just used to get so excited to see whatever thing she was going to work on. So--just admired her. And her demeanor with the kids was just--a tremendous amount of patience, you know. Quite capable of trying to help everybody. And she had a good sense of humor; I can still hear her laugh in my mind. Just a good, solid human being. I knew her and, you know, her struggles and the personal things about her, but she never let any of that interrupt her. And she had, you know, some tragic things happen around her life, but she was just solidly good. A very wonderful human being.

Q: And you actually--there's a great article in *The Bridgeport Post* from 1977 talking about the summer camps and how you and Ralph Williams made--helped the students make instruments

out of bottles. Can you talk a little bit about how your work at the Center transcended--you know, art in all of its forms--you know, not just traditional but also in terms of what you were doing in terms of getting the students to appreciate the ways in which this could influence even making music and other things.

Stamats: Oh gosh, I don't even remember that very well. (LAUGHTER) There were so many different avenues. I really kept pushing us to do more and more things because there was a large population of the kids who didn't thrive well in the public schools, with the traditional system; but I saw when they could get into creative things, and when they could be exposed to experiences beyond their self-imposed limitations they would be so excited that they found something that they enjoyed. It made no difference--we would make things--whatever the kids were kind of interested in doing, you could apply the arts to if you wanted to.

But I found that the Arts Center, while we had an awful lot of kids who came there and did things, it wasn't demanding that they sit there and only do art. They could do other things, too, you know. And we could try to engage them in surroundings that were healthy and exploratory in nature and encourage their enlightenment through fun things. It's kind of a different kind of attitude that you might think of in a traditional art education kind of program. Fortunately, we didn't have any guidelines that say you can't do this or you can't do that. None of that existed at all. So, if a kid came in and they were interested in drawing cartoons or comic books, which seemed to be very popular in those days, we'd help them, provide them--and show them some of the techniques and stuff.

You came to the Arts Center, it wasn't just your art class, it was an experience, and not really well-defined as far as the curriculum--it was very, very loose in so many ways. If somebody came in and they wanted to learn this or that--it wasn't just the children--I opened up--we kept the Center open at night and we had adult classes. Wendy on many occasions was there too. And we got a lot of the senior citizens from P.T. I had this group of ladies who came over and would start working on things and making all sorts of things while they were having conversations back and forth. But they were just so beautiful and so rich and the history of things that they remembered in their forties and even earlier--growing up and so on--that could relate to one another. So if we had anybody who was younger who would just come over and they could hear these stories while these ladies were working on different kinds of crafts, art, whatever it is they wanted--

I don't mean to be so nebulous, but it was kind of just getting to know the kids and kind of discovering whatever it was that sparked their interest was kind of the method even though I don't think that we were all that conscious of it, but we seemed to be--

And then if the kids came in and we were doing our own personal art or things like that and they wanted to figure out how to do that or wanted to have something of their own, then they would

step aside just start working on-- That was true for several of the kids. Leonardo (Drew) was probably the most successful. He definitely was the most successful one in the history of the Arts Center.

Q: You mention Leonardo. Could you talk a little bit about him or any other students that stood out in your mind.

Stamats: It was a few. There was a Jose Seaborn, there was a Larry Voyteck who was a white kid, and there was Leonardo Drew--were the stellar kids who were serious about art--kind of goofy in some ways, but they were serious about wanting to do art.

Larry had first discovered us when we were at the old Arts Center. And he lived not too far from the Arts Center, but he would make his way down at other hours. I don't know how he got there but--because he wanted to continue to paint and draw and stuff like that. And then when we moved to the Arts Center, the current one, he lived much closer so during the first couple of years or so we saw him more often. He would come over. He loved to draw, but he also started doing some sculptures. He--I can't remember the name of the neighborhood, but they had cut down some trees and he had asked one of the people in the City to allow him to have the bottom part of the tree, not to cut it to the ground. They were cut to the ground. He did some carvings in it. That was there for years and then somebody actually stole it. They cut the base off of it and took it away.

Q: I actually remember that. And Jose Seaborn--were you able to follow any of these people?--or Leonardo Drew?

Stamats: Once I left, I had a quite a bit of trouble not being at the Arts Center. Emotionally, I missed it horribly and I had a long period of time of serious depression about not being there and I found that if I kept trying to stay in contact with people sometimes it hurt. Wendy and Cindy would inform me if somebody had passed away. And then Wendy and Cindy came out here and visited in Colorado. I mean, I just--it was always hard to be away and know that I would rather have stayed there in many aspects.

Q: So let's talk about why you left.

Stamats: Well, I had gotten married.

Q: That was '77, right?

Stamats: Yeah. (LAUGHTER) Yeah. And I stayed there for another four years but the--I couldn't get ahead financially. My wife had a job, but it was still not as much fun. And while she

went along I used to do a lot of camping trips with the kids. And I used to take them on the weekends. And we'd just load up my van and head off somewhere. And we did--I don't know--many, many camping trips. Eventually, some of the co-workers at the Center said, "This looks like it must be fun," so they decided they would come with us on a camping trip. They had great fun, too. But I had a core group of kids that I kind of worked with--most of them lived in Building 21 (in P.T. Barnum Apartments)-- and were close and easily available. So we did a lot of trips, including it might be day trips, boys and girls, the camping trips just boys.

Q: Now, I have to tell you: I remember that van distinctly. In fact, several of the people I talked to kind of remembered that distinctively about you. I think the first time you took the kids trick-or-treating--

Stamats: Oh, that was fun. Yeah.

Q: Can you talk a little bit about that? It was unique. It stands out with--just about everybody I talked to has either mentioned going trick or treating or camping or some cultural excursion with you. And that certainly wasn't part of your job description, so where did that come from? And can you tell me about some of the things you did other than the camping?

Stamats: The whole Arts Center job was a job of love--it was nothing--it gave me the greatest happiness I'd ever had, sustained happiness, working with these kids. So that was not a job, that was for my own benefit. (LAUGHTER)

Halloween was something that--I started out with--I had a Volkswagen van and I could get nine or ten kids into that. And I lived in Westport so I thought, you know, "*Let's take these kids out.*" There was still the era of trick or treating with poisons and stuff. I thought, "It shouldn't happen in Westport, so let's go down there." You know, Westport was a pretty liberal town and so on. So I said, "Let's give it a try." So I brought all these kids to these super wealthy homes in Westport. And so curious--and they'd all get out and they'd go up to these homes that rarely got trick or treaters, and overwhelm the front door. Those people would come out and they'd see all these children and they'd scramble--The biggest one that I remember was the man did not have a thing to give them but cash. He gave each one of them five bucks.

Q: Wow.

Stamats: And those kids came back and they were just like: "Unbelievable!" (LAUGHTER) The most exciting thing that had ever had happened to them. And they went down--others had the treats--they were so well-received and they had such a great time doing that that I said, "Well, we've got to do this kind of like every year." But then I got a much bigger ban and I was able to put twenty-seven kids in it--and God, would that be illegal today! (LAUGHTER)

Q: I remember sitting in the back of that van and sitting on someone's lap on the way out to Westport. (AUDIO CUTS OFF) And Rich, you talked about getting married and leaving the Arts Center. You left the Arts Center in 81? '82?

Stamats: Right. '81. May of '81.

Q: And you went from there to Costa Rica, right?

Stamats: No, I went directly to Colorado Springs.

Q: Directly to Colorado Springs. You know, this is kind of what happened after you left, but in keeping in contact with the other staff members--why did the Arts Center close?

Stamats: Well, I think that Ben started having some emotional problems and he didn't have it together and he wasn't as coherent in his logic as he needed to be. Reverend Johnson, William O. Johnson, wrote me a letter in which he asked me my advice about what we could do to keep the Center going and stuff. They needed to figure out some directions and stuff. And I wrote him long, lengthy suggestions of what I thought would be best to do, but they probably needed to find another kind of Ben who seemed to be more functional at that time. And I think that it just became worrisome to try and apply for grants. I think that there was a change in the political system of having things like--Action for Bridgeport Community Development was waning politically. People didn't want to see the value of it or the powerful forces on the other side were too strong or overwhelming. I don't-- don't know all the final decisions--not being right there on hand I couldn't tell you. It was very sad to see that it wasn't thriving.

Reverend Johnson, he didn't seem to think that there was a lot of hope. So I don't know what was happening to all of ABCD at the time. I don't think that we could have operated without having a comptroller and other people who did all the background paper things. That took care of all the numbers and took care of all the detail work that's so essential. We weren't. Our makeup on the staff wasn't detail-oriented in keeping accounts and all that kind of stuff. We just--we knew our success by the radiance on the faces of the children in front of us.

Q: Now, you mentioned Reverend William O. Johnson; can you talk a little bit about his patronage and also Charles Tisdale?

Stamats: Charles (Charles Tisdale, Director of ABCD) was there--was the first one that I was under. He seemed to be a man, in my opinion--I really didn't know him very well--on a real political agenda. He wanted things to happen, but I didn't get the feeling that he cared about the people as much as he cared about himself. Johnson, on the other point, he did seem to have a lot

of compassion for genuine people, he made good bonds, he communicated one-on-one.

Q: Can you--I mean, I know but I just want to have you on record officially--what was Reverend Jonson's role?

Stamats: Well, he was down at the office, he would come out occasionally, but he was at the old ABCD headquarters most of the time. He had been at our place off and on for a good deal of the time. I don't remember what his function was at Gary Crooks. He always seemed to be supportive. You know, there was--he never demanded anything to us directly--I don't know if in private conversations he ever said anything to Ben, but I never got any direct feedback. He seemed to more--he spoke to us directly as kind of like co-equals. He didn't have--like Tisdale was pretty arrogant in the way he talked to anybody and he didn't listen very well. And that, you know, was discouraging.

Tisdale had brought somebody who was from I think one of the western--a mayor from one of the western towns [*sic*] in Africa--I can't remember which one it was--Liberia. I think it was Liberia. And he walked us around and so forth. Tisdale didn't know any of us. He knew Ben but none of the other people. William Johnson knew all of us and referred to us. It was night and day between the two.

And I know that Reverend Johnson had--he had a number of different affairs as I understand it, outside of his marriage and stuff, and he was quite a scoundrel in that kind of way, but on a one-to-one level he was a decent man.

Q: And in terms of--because I know you weren't there when it actually closed, but just kind of a larger takeaway question--how do you think the Bridgeport community benefitted, or would benefit, by the re-opening of an arts center--any community for that matter, not just Bridgeport but any community similarly situated?

Stamats: You know, the arts have always been the remedy for things that have gone wrong throughout society. When the arts blossom and people express and have tolerance for it, all of society tags along, improves, and their plight life is enlightened. There's a spiritual connection to each other that isn't held by regular schools. If you can connect to the spiritual dimension of human beings, you release them from this mundane, materialistic kind of pursuit of life daily. There's something--whenever a city is really in trouble and starts to die, you'll find that the thing that resurrects it or brings it back or restores it is bringing in the arts--whether it's performing or plastic arts or whatever it turns out to be. Those seem to be the thing or the seed that stimulates all the other things that may come from it. So Bridgeport, which has had a history of great trouble since the end of World War II financially and socially, somehow or other occasionally has had arts in it, but it hasn't been a fervent, sustaining kind of effort. It has to be--the people

working there don't have to feel like, next grant will we be able to stay and survive. And it needs to be expressed as the spiritual benefit of human beings, that it takes them to a newer plane about themselves, it takes them out of some of the drudgery of life. It's the only thing that will. Sports and everything else are wonderful and they're enthusiastic, but they don't--other than having people watch a game--they don't turn into themselves and explore their own feelings. So--

Q: Wow. Just--wow. A final question for you, Rich: what do you want to say about the Arts Center that hasn't already been asked? That you feel that I didn't cover that you think is essential for people to know?

Stamats: Other than what I just said, I think as human beings we have progressed so enormously in material conditions. The world has even from the day I left the Center till now, the computer world and everything else, has so exploded but we're still kind of --that half of society is advanced. But as we've seen in recent years, the kind of social failure of people in their jobs--have not been attracted to a remedy. It's still proclaiming the injustices and the anger about that. You really need to plant something that is--where love can germinate to transcend all the errors and mistakes and hatred that exist. And I think the Arts Center did it for a small circle, the kids that we could really reach--and we couldn't reach them all--it did have an impact and it did in ways that we didn't perceive at the time. We were having just a good time. There was a tremendous amount of love between the staff and what we were accomplishing, but we didn't know that we were accomplishing anything because we were sort of focusing on: *Well, let's see, you know, we have a budget for this much and we've got these kids-- where can we go? What can we do?* But I think that in hindsight it was the love that was there that made it all work.

The mechanics were not as relevant as you might expect. It had to do with things that are just kind of out of sight of human beings that were there. And I think you need to replicate that kind of experience. The kids came to depend on us, count on us, and we gave all that we could give. You just had--people just had to have the right heart about it. And we seemed to have.

Q: Rich, I want to thank you. It's hard to believe: we've been talking for over an hour and it feels like fifteen minutes. Is there anybody you can think of that you think we should--I think Michelle shared with you the names on our list--is there anybody you think we should talk to?

Stamats: Yeah, if you can find Larry Voyteck and if you can find Jose Seaborn-- I think he had an art gallery somewhere in Pennsylvania for a while--if you can find some of those. Or talk to Leonardo and see what his take is. He had me come out and interviewed me for part of his biography that they're shooting on his life.

I think that some of the students--if we get some of these pictures out there and they can identify themselves or remember whatever it is-- I always got a kick out of going around Bridgeport

where kids would recognize me and they'd come out and say, "Do you remember that class and that project?" I could not remember that class and the project, but I could remember the faces. And they'd say, "I still have it on my desk or still have it--" Something like: *Wow, I didn't know. I didn't know.* So if those kids, if you could find them--I don't know how you would track them down; maybe through --if there's any record of the schools we--And I don't know--I think that once you start getting some exposure about what you're doing out here, you'd probably find a number of kids who are in their forties and fifties who will come out and say, *Hey, yeah, that was something I did*, blah, blah, blah because there was--the kids that I worked with--I don't know--Jerry Brown was one of the kids, Dan Gardner, they're around, Carlton Brown, he lives down in South Carolina now. He's on my Facebook. I had him help me with a mural at a car wash there in Bridgeport. I had him come and help me work with me on this mural. He was my helper. And it was on the front page of the paper. And he has no art sense at all. And he wrote me and said if I had any pictures to send them because his daughters cannot believe that ever did anything in art. (LAUGHTER)

Q: That's great.

Stamats: So I did. I had the article and I sent it to him so he could have some proof that he did do some art work.

Q: That's fantastic. So I think, Rich, let me pause this--that concludes at least the formal part of our interview.

END OF INTERVIEW